# *The Cosmopolis Harem:*

# Intimacy, Power and Liminal Family Formation

# In Late-19th Century Qajar Iran

*The Cosmopolis Harem* offers a social history of the late Qajar harem during Nasir al-Din Shah’s reign (1848-1896) – a woman-dominated homosocial space, housed in a unique domestic institution wherein tradition, modernity, piety, cosmopolitanism, gender, class and racial differences were negotiated by a host of local and transnational residents and visitors. Specifically, my book focuses on the demographic, physical, topographic, and representational dimensions of Nasser al-Din Shah’s harem, the complex social and familial relations within it, and the everyday lives of its constituents.

The late-Qajar royal harem is a rich site for the study of the historical, cultural, spatial and gendered entanglements within the 19th century Iranian modernization project. For its time, the complex social structure and demographic heterogeneity within the Gulistan harem was quite unique, as it housed residents from various parts of the empire, as well as a large population of migrant and enslaved laborers from interregional networks. The institution was also the object of fascination, study, and sometimes, the destination for a host of elite local and international visitors, many of whom left accounts of their impressions and observations. While Nassir al-Din Shah’s harem is one of the most well-documented and ubiquitous women-dominated spaces of 19th century Tehran, its actual social history is buried under large amounts of politically and ideologically driven mythical narratives. The hypervisibility of Qajar harem women in the cultural memory of Iranians is in part constructed through the multiple representations of them which have continued to circulate to this day: European writing about Qajar Iran, as well as early Iranian photographs, often taken by Nassir al-Din himself, are two of the primary sites which represent this space and its constituents. These accounts and images have served as source materials, which have continuously re-circulated within various cultural registers and popular historical imagination. Their proliferation, however, is in contrast to the absence of scholarly accounts of Qajar harem in the historiography of late-Qajar Iran. My book project responds to this historiographical gap, by offering an interdisciplinary social history of the Qajar harem.

Located within the ever-expanding Gulistan Palace, and in the heart of a developing Tehran, the Gulistan harem was physically and socially structured around a set of extremely rigid hierarchies, based on both Islamic and Iranian traditions, which were often undermined by various affective bonds, developed through relations of proximity, and sometimes cunning negotiations. One of the central arguments that runs throughout this work is that the Gulistan harem was one of the central loci of negotiations with modernity in late-19th century urban Tehran. Throughout the manuscript, I examine the complex social and physical structure of this institution, and the everyday life of its residents—at various points estimated to be between 700 and 2000 wives and female relatives, as well as different classes of employees­—from physicians and translators, to servants, maids, slaves, and eunuchs.

**Chapter Breakdown**

The book relies on over a decade of research in a number of libraries and archives both inside and outside of Iran and is divided into five chapters. Chapter I focuses on the social structure of Nasir al-Din Shah’s harem and the different forms of familial and conjugal relations within it, which were a defining feature of the day-to-day life of its residents. Relying on the works of feminist and new imperial historians who focus on family and intimacy such as Afsaneh Najmabadi, Ann Laura Stoler and Durba Ghosh, the chapter engages in a deep reading of how affective attachments across social class, as well as gender and racial boundaries, were a common occurrence in the Qajar harem, and mark this space as a unique and heterotopic site of female community, homosocial bonding, and extended kinship networks that formed contemporaneously with processes of modernization, which were also an inherent feature of daily life within this institution. This chapter introduces the late-Qajar harem as a familial space, and a laboratory of transnational encounters with modernity, where European culture and artifacts were variously integrated and rejected.

Chapter II emphasizes and analyzes the specificity of Gulistan Palace’s physical space, its topographic legacy, and its concurrent expansion and development in the second half of the 19th century along with Tehran’s rapid modernization project. Despite being located in what was at the time the historical core of the capital of the empire, and steps away from iconic institutions including the Grand Bazaar and Dar al-Fanun University, the Gulistan *andarun*, has been relegated to an outdated and traditional institution, associated with a deeply gendered division between private and public life. In this chapter, I offer a different account of the institution as a deeply cosmopolitan space through looking at its spatial organization and the ways in which different bodies, ideologies, and commodities were distributed within and outside of its physical boundaries. The chapter interrogates what constituted private, interior, and domestic spaces, respectively, when speaking of the royal Qajar harem—a space composed of multiple homes within a larger palace, which was the administrative center of Qajar rule, and in the heart of an expanding Tehran.

Chapter III examines the differing classes of maids, servants, and slaves that resided and worked within the royal palace, and traces their history in parallel to the history of slavery in Iran. Many of the servants and eunuchs which were a part of this institution were brought to Iran either after being captured in war, or were imported through an expanding Persian Gulf slave trade in the last decades of the 19th century. These specific classes of residents reveal a great deal about geo-political negotiations, interregional networks, and the various forms of migration within them during the period. Inside the harem, these individuals were incorporated into the larger population of Gulistan as different classes of laborers, working in various capacities such as maids, teachers, wet nurses, nannies, cooks, or harem guards. This chapter takes up the category of court and harem servants, many of whom were initially brought in as slaves, and examine them as liminal figures within the broader population of court and harem residents, who often navigated their position in ways which allowed them to seek agency and power. I argue that court servants participated in the affective economy of Gulistan Palace in a myriad of complex ways, often within profoundly uneven power relations. This chapter attempts to write such figures back in as core constituents of Gulistan Palace.

Chapter IV interrogates the various representations of Nasir al-Din Shah’s harem in both European and native accounts of the institution from the period. My emphasis is on the conceptual and descriptive accounts of the harem, as shaped and represented by various narratives and archives, and what they tell us about the different kinds of investments that different parties had in this space. Central to my analysis is an engagement with Ann Laura Stoler’s call for a methodological shift in approaching historical sources - a move away from reading against the grain, which she argues is a form of critical data mining, and towards a “reading along the grain,” an immersive approach that allows the historian to understand the pulse of each source, which dictates the logic of its content. This chapter engages with the accumulation of conflicting narratives about the Gulistan harem—descriptions, assessments and anecdotes—in order to examine what they reveal about the tensions between various forms of knowledge production and the divergent interpretations of everyday life that underwrote them.

Finally, Chapter V attempts to trace what happened to the constituents of Nasir al-Din Shah’s harem after his assassination in 1896, following which the institution was disbanded. While there is little historical scholarship on the afterlife of harem residents in the wake of Muzaffar al-Din Shah taking the throne, the little we do know paints a grim picture of loneliness and poverty for many of Nasir al-Din Shah’s wives and daughters. However, some of the key court servants and performers fared better outside. For example, after the disbanding of the Gulistan *andarun*, harem entertainers were amongst the most skilled individuals who were evicted, and many were able to use the training they had acquired in the harem to make comfortable lives for themselves as key figures in the developing entertainment district of downtown Tehran during the first decades of the 20th century. Similarly, many of the servants, who had developed relationships with the adjacent Tehran Bazar merchants, were able to rely on their networks to earn lucrative incomes during and after the constitutional period and became part of the *bazari* class. This final chapter thus offers an account of the afterlife of this particular class of former court servants, and their trajectories during the constitutional era and its immediate aftermath.